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ABSTRACT

This paper takes the position that the main premise of "The Bell Curve" (by Richard Murray and Charles Herrnstein) is that significant advantages exist for possessing an IQ toward the top of the range--advantages that pertain to school success, career, and income. The premise is that people with high IQs have naturally acquired scholarly and economic advantages in life as well as moral superiority. The position is taken that although the book's authors argue against the trends towards an increasingly isolated wealthy and cognitive elite, they fail to see that their plan will create further inequity while bolstering the existing hierarchy. The implications of their plan are (1) test children early and educate those with high IQs; (2) eliminate remedial programs at the high school and college level in favor of job skills training; (3) the radical pedagogies that address the inequities of class, color and gender are inherently flawed; and (4) advanced literacy, higher education, professional status, and political power can automatically be assigned to those who provide intellectually capable. The position is taken that the assumptions set out in "The Bell Curve" would establish an educational and economic Jim Crow system for disenfranchised Americans. The question of who decides who among us is fit to become literate, get good jobs, go to college, and partake fully in the democratic process may be more important than the answer postulated by "The Bell Curve." "The overriding question that Murray and Herrnstein ask in 'The Bell Curve' is this: What do we expect to discover in this research; moreover, what do we believe and want to conclude?" (Contains 16 references.) (RS)

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The Bell Curve And the Future of Literacy:
If This is the Answer, What is the Question?

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When I first began my research for this paper, some time after I had read *The Bell Curve*, I ran a search on the book using an Internet cruiser called NETSCAPE. This is a hypertext search vehicle that can carry you deeper and deeper into a subject one click at a time, if the material is there. Well, there was plenty of information on *The Bell Curve*, page after page of it. One site that caught my attention was a list of American scholars who allegedly support the positions laid out in the book. I glanced over the list, printed it out, and clicked on the <BACK> icon at the bottom of the page. However, instead of returning to the previous page to continue my search, I was taken to another page entitled "The Aryan Crusader's Library" which listed books and essays including *White Aryan Resistance*, *Ku Klux Klan by the Imperial Klaliff*, and "Why White Nationalism?" There were many others, and although *The Bell Curve* was not included on this very specialized list, its proximity in that virtual space seems more than a coincidence.

It is a proximity not only in this strange virtual space that exists somewhere in the Internet, but one that, I will argue, exists within the minds of both the supporters and detractors who read *The Bell Curve*. Thus, I ask the question that

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titles this paper: If this is the answer, what is the question? If, as they claim, Herrnnstein and Murray are answering a profound and essential question about human beings, specifically those who differ according to race, then the nature of that question is, I would argue, more important than the answer. I say this, first, because answers are particularly slippery things. Let me give you some relevant examples:

In 1898, Alfred Binet, director of the psychology laboratory at the Sorbonne, decided to study the measurement of intelligence with the then favored method of measuring skulls, the "science" of craniology. Binet, like his contemporaries was a believer in the body of research and evidence that had accrued through the work of the Paul Broca school of psychology. Binet wrote, "The relationship between the intelligence of subjects and the volume of their head...is very real and has been confirmed by all methodical investigators, without exception..." Binet then did the most remarkable thing of all. He approached his craniological research with an objectivity that approximated an open mind and discovered that the claims of his colleagues simply did not add up. In one important study, Binet and his student Simon measured the same heads. Binet later said, "I took my measures mechanically, without any other preconception than to remain faithful to my methods"(148). The results bothered Binet, because his measurements did not match Simon's tallies, and, in fact, contradicted the expectations that the so-called feeble-minded did not have smaller skulls than the "normal" subjects.. Measuring a second time, being sure to identify each individual first, Binet's measurements fit

these expectations. From this experiment, Alfred Binet established the significance of the suggestibility and bias that the researcher can bring to a study and effectively discredited craniology.

In 1913, H. H. Goddard's study of Ellis Island immigrants found that, of the "randomly selected" Jews, Russians, Hungarians, and Italians who were tested, 80% or better were "feeble-minded," a result that Goddard declared to be "astounding." In 1921, after administering his Army Beta Test to servicemen, Robert M. Yerkes was shocked to announce that "37 percent of whites and 89 percent of negroes" in America were "morons," having a mental age below twelve. In 1994, Murray and Herrnstein layed out a point by point argument leading to the conclusion that tested IQ and morality have a strong correlation -- the lower the IQ, the more likely one will sink to a life of crime and depravity. In 1920, H. H. Goddard wrote, "The intelligence controls the emotions, and the emotions are controlled in proportion to the degree of intelligence." Goddard and his contemporary hereditarians, says Gould, were convinced that , "High intelligence not only permits us to do our sums; it also engenders the good judgement that underlies all moral behavior" (Gould, 160). Such answers crop up throughout this century and include the discredited U.S. Army Beta Test that declared half of all American men "feeble-minded" in 1923 and was used to place the average IQ of South African blacks at 70 in 1929 (Rosen & Lane). They include Carl Bereiter's declaration that black children communicated by "single words," and "a series of badly connected words and phrases." It was " as if the children had no language at

all," declared Bereiter (Labov), and they include the school conditions that face the poor in America, the low expectations, poor funding, hazardous conditions, and generally inadequate education (Kozol, *Illiterate America*).

Taken in this context, it appears that *The Bell Curve* is an old bag of discriminatory practice and racist theories tidied up and offered to us in a new package. Let's look at the book's new and improved answer.

The main premise of Murray and Herrnstein's work is that there are significant advantages to possessing an IQ toward the top of the range-- say 125 and higher, advantages that pertain to school success, career and income, as we might expect, but the authors turn the import of this old cliché up a few significant and troubling notches. They drag out an impressive lineup of research and anecdotal evidence to support their position that, not only do people with "high IQs" have naturally acquired scholarly and economic advantages in life, but they possess moral superiority as well. *The Bell Curve's* "cognitive elite" are less likely to commit crimes, become pregnant out of wedlock, abuse illicit drugs and alcohol, remain unemployed or underemployed, ... They are elite in every way. In effect Murray and Herrnstein claim that "g", the numerical measure of "general intelligence" proposed by former British Army Officer, Charles Spearman in 1904, is consistent and trustworthy as a measure of people's capabilities and by implication, of their morality.

I am not an expert on "g", but I understand it to be a statistical correlation

between the IQ test and other aspects in life, including other tests, Intelligence, and by Murray and Herrnstein's reckoning, the virtuous character of a good American. Thus, *The Bell Curve's* concept of "g" presupposes an acceptance of a correlation between low IQ scores and low intellectual competence, morality, and such.

I do not wish to make light of the book's topic, because many of the problems Murray and Herrnstein discuss are profoundly troubling and beg for solutions. The authors too see the growing separation between the classes, the cognitive elite and others, as a potential crisis. According to Ralph Reiland , Murray and Herrnstein are concerned with the increasing gap between a minority rich and the majority of Americans. They argue against the trend towards "an increasingly isolated wealthy and cognitive elite, a merging of the cognitive and affluent elites, and a deteriorating quality of life for people excluded from the upper reaches of the cognitive ability distribution." They are addressing real problems; however, they are looking through the distorted lens of the affluent, older, white male. Murray and Herrnstein, in seeing this crisis of inequity, fail to see that their plan will create further inequity while bolstering the existing hierarchy. One important key to this hegemonic replication is the perpetuation of the conventional model of literacy and the concomitant policy that dominates our society.

THE BELL CURVE'S LITERACY: THE ANSWER CONTINUES

Paulo Freire has suggested that the high dropout rate of American schools is,

even today, "a triumph of the schooling class" (121), that "the curriculum and other material conditions in schools," by design "negate their (the dropouts) histories, cultures, and day to day experiences" (121). Freire is not alone in this harsh view of Western education. Jonathan Kozol, Mike Rose, Richard Rodriguez, and British researcher Paul Willis show us how blatantly some are elected to succeed while others are permitted, even encouraged, to fail. J. Elspeth Stuckey sees current literacy policy as a violent attack on the disenfranchised aimed at keeping them down, further disenfranchising, lowering expectations and limiting opportunity. Those who see this seemingly built-in separation between the haves and have-nots are not dreaming up conspiracy theories. Many, in fact, are remarkably even-handed in their estimation of the problem and may see the solutions arising from the very system that creates such inequity. Yet it is clear that the creation and recreation of this social, economic, political hierarchy is, in many respects, intentional.

What then are the implications of this path for Education? First, Murray and Herrnstein's way will certainly simplify things.

- ▶ If a simple IQ test can gauge an individual's ability to learn, to succeed professionally, and to live productively and virtuously in society, those in power can test children early and focus our efforts and resources on educating those who fit into the cognitive elite category. They need not feel guilty for ignoring the underclasses or for offering less because science is on

our side. For most Americans, then, failure is no longer failure but the achievement of limited expectations.

- ▶ As literacy programs aimed at "remediating" students in high schools and colleges are costly, labor-intensive, and dubiously successful, such efforts can be eliminated in favor of more realistic and quantifiable job skills training, tracking and openly sanctioned lower expectations.
- ▶ Educators working in literacy theory, cultural studies, basic writing, mathematics, study skills and such, can better use their time in more traditional scholarship and need not be bothered with the dreaded bottom-feeder courses.
- ▶ Energy can "again" be turned to the young cognitive elite who have the wherewithal to take advantage of their intellectual gifts.
- ▶ The radical pedagogies that address the inequities of class, color and gender are inherently flawed. Thus they are useless, unsupportable, and unfundable. This is particularly important because these pedagogies are often seen as threatening to the status-quo by those who benefit the most from the current system.

- ▶ Advanced literacy, higher education, professional status, and political power can automatically be assigned to those who prove intellectually capable of handling such responsibilities. These, according to Herrnstein and Murray, are the cognitive elite, who also tend to be the white majority.

One could argue, of course, that society is already controlled by a self-anointed cognitive (and social) elite, a small group which controls and limits educational and other opportunities and works within and perpetuates a structure that serves its own needs. This is the group Robert Reich labelled the "symbolic analysts" and which already, according to Reich, is disengaging from the other four-fifths of Americans and their social and economic needs (Nations, 250). It includes scientists, managers, engineers, systems analysts, bankers, lawyers, consultants of various kinds, and much of the academy, the holders of intellectual capital. Already the growing lower class, made up of minorities, women, and the group Richard Rodriguez called "skinny white males" are being delegated to economic insignificance. The situation is not good, but under the Murray and Herrnstein answer the current inequities would pale by comparison to a new paradigm supported by research and implemented by government and social policy in which each American would be given access to education and economic opportunity in direct relation to what each already had. The wealthy and educated would be made richer and given access to more information and learning tools. The poor, undereducated would, by decree, remain so. Just as Goddard's insightful

employees claimed to be able to identify and thus deny entry to the feeble-minded immigrants at Ellis Island by sight -- their suspicions corroborated through IQ testing --, the assumptions set out in *The Bell Curve* would establish an educational and economic Jim Crow system for disenfranchised Americans. And, as with those immigrants, the results would be largely predetermined.

This is not paranoia on my part. There are numerous examples of the dominant culture's penchant for quashing or otherwise controlling the successes of the disenfranchised. The freedom schools of the 1800s were outlawed by the white community. Then, when postwar black schools flowered across the South, these too were legislated virtually out of existence by racist policy-makers (Holt). Kozol describes communities in which extreme poverty is exacerbated and perpetuated by government and corporate policy. Students have shown how, even in well-to-do school districts, minorities and the poor are far more likely than their more affluent white peers to be placed in special and remedial education programs in which expectations and achievement are predictably low (Labov, 1972; Eisenman, 1992). Ohmann, LeBlanc, Barton, and others have documented the disparities between white and minority students in computer instruction. The disenfranchised are likely to be given dull drill-and-practice exercises while white students, particularly the well-to-do, are much more apt to be involved in creative, analytical, and interesting computer work. Each is being initiated into his or her predetermined slot. It takes little imagination to envision an even more inequitable, judgemental and restrictive literacy hierarchy than those that have already existed.

Naturally education would still be available to all children, but it would be a tracked education in which those with the natural gifts (a la *The Bell Curve*) would concentrate resources on one small group. At best, the cognitively unblessed would be warehoused in Hirschian functional literacy programs that provided little challenge or promise. More likely, the alleged inferiority of some would be applied to all members of that group, giving rise to the kind of officially sanctioned and codified discrimination of our country's history that permitted black men to be counted as only half a person and women as none at all in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Societies tend to follow the path of least resistance. In this case, the path to government supported inequity would be well greased by public policy and discourse and pseudo-scientific rhetoric. This new literacy, of, by, and for the cognitive elite would fit nicely into the paternalistic communities that Murray and Herrnstein envision in which the cognitively lacking would be given suitable employment, letting them join the rest of us in being valuable and valued contributors to the community. I suspect that this vision of equality would look something like the gender equity I saw in the People's Republic of China when I taught there some years ago. The local city and college leaders, who just happened to be men, recited with pride the official policies that established complete equality between male and female comrades. Women could become leaders, just as men had traditionally done, and men could be given the more menial, lower tier jobs. It just so happened that all of the street cleaner, dung scoopers, and coal shovellers my wife and I saw were women, and nearly all of the leaders were men. In our

culture, we like to believe that men and women are achieving equity yet our governor, CEOs, scientists, and the bulk of managers remain male. Popular movies still portray women as sexual playthings and victims of male violence (often concurrently), and traditionally female professions and life-roles remain second-class. Policy is not necessarily practice, and practice does not always produce the desired results.

The question of who decides who among us is fit to become literate, to get good jobs, to go to college, to partake fully in the democratic process is simplified if we accept *The Bell Curve's* conclusions, that is that we would, in fact, be foolish to trust the well-being of our schools, our government, ourselves and our children to those who, by virtue of their lesser intelligence and moral judgement are deemed to be incompetent. In the final chapter of their book, Herrnstein and Murray outline a plan for America's future in which each citizen is allowed to participate according to his or her abilities, abilities defined largely by the authors' intelligence testing--participation based on what Herrnstein, Murray and other "right thinking" people judge to be the appropriate criteria.

THE QUESTION

Earlier I suggested that the question may be more important than the answer postulated by *The Bell Curve*. This is supported by the substance of that answer, its overtly racist and classcist tone, its dependence on correlation to suggest cause, its omission of nearly all opposing studies, and its failure to present those that support their position honestly. *The Bell Curve's* answer is a throwback to the

most oppressive of societies in the guise of equity and objectivity. It creates a place where a homogenized intellectual elite makes the rules and profits by those rules. It is a place where literacy is designed to liberate or dominate, depending on reported cognitive status of the individual and, most significantly, of the group to which he or she belongs. The protests of Murray and Herrnstein notwithstanding, the answer both implicit and explicit in *The Bell Curve* sets the stage for increased inequity and decreased opportunity; increased poverty and decreased literacy; increased taking and decreased giving; increased separation and decreased community. It is a sad, perhaps terrifying answer. What could the question be?

Just as the answer found in *The Bell Curve* is surprisingly unoriginal, the question has been asked again and again and is almost too simple. It is a question that slave traders and slave owners had to ask themselves constantly, I suspect, and which many Germans had to live with during World War II. It is a question that helped fuel South African Apartheid, settlement of the American continent, and killing in Ruanda, Sri Lanka, Nicaragua, Northern Ireland, and Chechnia. Alfred Binet discovered the significance of this question in 1900, and Willaim Labov wrote about it in 1972 when he discussed the importance of expectations on a child's success or failure. The overriding question that Murray and Herrnstein ask in *The Bell Curve* is this: "What do we expect to discover in this research; moreover, what do we believe and want to conclude?" Murray and Herrnstein, like Goddard, Yerkes, Bereiter, Jensen, and many others have proven, if anything, the power of personal ideology, suggestion, and cultural conditioning. Moreover, we are not

guiltless in this movement toward inequity and must recognize the power of the intellectual ego to rationalize the status-quo and our privileged position in it.

CONCLUSION

The question is as unremarkable as the answer. Hereditarians have been proving the inferiority of "the Other" for as long as there has been an Other. What is remarkable, and problematically so, is, certainly, the authors' willingness to create so distorted a picture of Americans, but even more troubling is the book's popularity. There is little consolation in realizing that a great deal of the support comes from people who have not read the book, or who took it at face value. It seems, at a time when a celebrated murder trial can divide us so neatly along racial lines, when Lewis Farakhan and Patrick Buchanan command huge followings, and when a mood of isolationism and virulent anti-immigrant sentiment is growing, Murray and Herrnstein have openly thrown fuel on the fire. Their question elicits an answer that demands division, inequity and domination. Yet it also elicits other questions about the complexities of coexistence and about community, equity, and social courage and innovation. These are the questions that are not so easily answered and which, ultimately, are the most important of all.

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